

FORMS, CONTEXT AND SIGNIFICANCE OF TATTOO MARKS IN ORU-IJEBU

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Abstract

This paper sheds some light on the forms, context and significance of tattoo marks in Oru-Ijebu. Tattoo means body decoration. They were marks scarified through deep cuts on the body of women to indicate their loyalty to a suitor. Tattoo was a flourishing art from the earliest times till the middle of 19th century among the Ijebus when the practice of tattooing became apparently outdated as a result of the socio-cultural and religious influences on marks making. It is however hoped that if the intricacies of tattooing were adequately taught at the women education centre's in Oru-Ijebu and the influx of wedding ring and cosmetics were not allowed to erode tattoo marks, this culture would have been preserved till date.

Marks made on the body in tradition African culture were of two kinds; permanent and temporary marks. Ajayi (2011) posited that sometimes, a great deal of tattoos were permanent marks given perhaps to attach a lady to a suitor and tattoo is therefore a social means of attracting men into marriage. At Oru-Ijebu, tattoo is a very effective communicative or informative system from the earliest times till the middle of 19th century when this culture became outdated as a result of civilization. However, tattoo marks have specific communicative meanings, which could only be understood by the particular society where they were commonly used. From the earliest times, tattoos, as said, often appeared as deep cuts on human body most especially on the women's arms, legs, lower abdomen, back and chest with inspiring love slogan like:

1. I am yours obediently my dear
2. My husband, commit me into your bosom etc.

The Geographical Location of Oru-Ijebu

Oru-Ijebu is a medium sized town in Ijebu North Local Government Area of Ogun State, Nigeria. It is situated at a distance of about ten (10) kilometres North of Ijebu-Ode, along Ijebu-Ode/Ibadan road. Ijebu-Igbo stands at a distance of five (5) kilometres west of Oru. Five (5) kilometres east of Oru, lies Ago-Iwoye and to the immediate North of Oru, lies Awa.

The boundaries of Oru, Awa, Ago-Iwoye and Ijebu-Ode may be difficult to discern by the stranger because the rapid expansion of the four (4) towns has more or less obliterated the erstwhile traditional boundaries between them.

Until recently, the inhabitants of Oru were predominantly farmers. Nowadays, however, with emergence of the Olabisi Onabanjo University which is just about two (2) kilometres away from Oru, Oru is fast experiencing urbanization.

The History of Oru

Oral tradition reveals that Oru was founded by one of the sons of the Awujale of Ijebu-land in the lineage of Ijasi. The founder of Oru was the first-born and the heir to the throne of his father. Being a hunter who could wander into the forest for several months without returning home, he

missed a chance of being elected by the king-makers to the throne of his late father. Consequently, his younger brother was crowned instead.

When Oru returned from his hunting expedition, and discovered that his younger brother had been given his birthright, he returned to his old station, on the edge of a small stream near the heart of the present site of Oru and settled there. During one of the rainy seasons, the same stream washed his goods away when it overflowed its bank unexpectedly and he remarked that the stream was wicked (*'Eri wee ika'*). This stream which is one of the major streams in Oru is known as *'Ereka'* till date. At the end of the aforementioned disaster, Oru was said to have moved up stream towards the caravan route between Ijebu Ode and Ibadan and it was at this location that he was identified with his water pot called *'Oru'* - hence, people would say *'Baba Oloru fun wa l'omi mu'*. This means, "owner of the pot, please give us water to drink". This is how Oloru became the title of the civil head of Oru, and Oru became the name of the town.

Oru was destined to play a prominent role in the socio-economic life of Ijebu and indeed, the whole of Yoruba land. With the diversion of the trade route across the Sahara desert to the sea and the determination of the Ijebus not to open up their towns to the Europeans, Oru was shot into prominence. The famous Oru market quickly grew and was in no time, recognized as the only market, north of Ijebu where visiting traders could exchange their goods including slaves, for manufactured articles from the coast. Thus, the Ijebus became important middlemen between the Europeans and the Oyo Yorubas. To protect this position, Oru became the seat of the *Are Kankanfo* of Ijebu-land. One of the notable *Ares* posted to Oru to protect the interest of Ijebu was Kankanfro Nofowokan (Odubiyi, 1989). The street along which the old Oru market was situated is known as *Kankanfo Street* till date. The improved economic prosperity that accompanied the sudden change in the status of Oru attracted immigrants from far and near and the town further experienced growth. Today, there are nine settlements which form the integral part of Oru. They are: *Sagun, Imota, Ayetoro, Odogbe, Tireyin, Oriwu, Ikansi, Ajebo* and *Agerige*. Each of these has its distinct history which is not within the scope of this paper.

Historical Background of Scarification

It is widely believed that scarification originated from the Middle East. The Hebrews during the Stone Age, had made flints of stones to circumcise their male children (Nelson, 2004). The Hebrew's belong to the Semitic race. The Yorubas too belong to the Semitic race (Ajayi & Micheal, 1982) Aderibigbe (1983) posited that the Yorubas originated from the "Near East" when the "Ancient Egyptian theory" of the origin of the Yorubas were assessed from the Yoruba Historical Research Scheme. No wonder then, most of the practices of the Middle East found their way into the Yoruba land. Perhaps, this may imply that the Yoruba's borrowed the idea of scarifying the body from their ancestral home. An epic in the history of the Yoruba's however, proves that even if the idea is from the ancestral home, some applications of it are indigenous.

Oral traditions has it that during the reign of Sango as the Alaafin of Oyo, scarification as an art of body decoration was discovered and used. The discovery was by accident. Sango, being of Tapa descent, sent an emissary to the king of Nupe ostensibly to offer a sacrifice to his late mother, but the emissaries were to listen to the name of his mother when her spirit would be invoked during sacrifice. It was the name of his mother that Sango wanted to know. The messengers consist of a Hausa and a Yoruba man. They were so well received that the Hausa man forgot his secret assignment. On their

return, Sango was annoyed with the Hausa messenger and he therefore ordered that he be given two hundred and one (201) incisions as a punitive measure.

When the wounds healed up, the Hausa man became a target of admiration by everybody, including the king's wives and they persuaded Sango to submit himself to the man who scarified the Hausa man. He could only take two strokes of the knife because of the excruciating pain and he ordered the man to stop. The two strokes, which he received, are still the symbol of identification of the members of the royal family of Oyo. They are called '*Akeyo*'. This was how marks as a symbol of identification were born. It became imperative later for noble members of the public to find a way of identifying their off springs hence, scarification metamorphosed into the complex art which goes by the name facial marks and a crop of specialists in scarification developed. They are called the '*Oloola*' (the native surgeons).

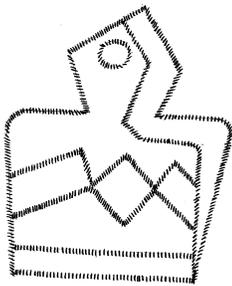
Tattoo Marks in Oru – Ijebu:

Tattoo is no doubt, a later development from facial marks. It is an aspect of Fine Art which requires a lot of skill and a high taste for beauty. As a result, not all the Oloolas are successful tattoo makers. Oral tradition reveals that the introduction of tattoo in Oru was one of the advantages of the economic interaction with the various people from all corners of Yoruba land which was possible as a result of Oru's position as the Northern market town of the Ijebu's.

The motifs for tattoo making range between the purely abstract to semi abstract (Bonnett & Mowbray, 2006). Except in some cases where lettering is used and the name of the pattern is dictated by the motif used, some of the most common motifs are Ooya, Eegun Eja, Igbanu and Agogo.

1. Ooya:

This is an adaptation of the traditional hair-comb. It looks like a triangle with three spiral-shaped projections at the apex of each angle. The inner side is filled with horizontal lines. Some people call this pattern '*Omolangi*', but out of the five women found with this pattern at Oru, only one of them referred to it as *Omolangi*. Even an old Oloola in the town referred to the motif as *Ooya* hence, Ooya is no doubt the most popular name for the motif *and it* is often found on the arm, chest, thigh and the back of women.



e.g Fig. 1. Omolangi

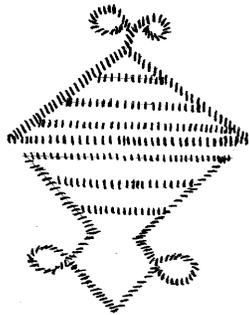


Fig ii. Ooya

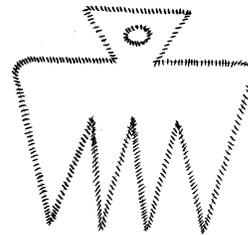


fig. iii. Traditional Comb

2. **Eegun Eja:**

This is a motif which is completely abstract. It looks like a park of multiplication signs. It is often found across the waist, the wrist and the neck.

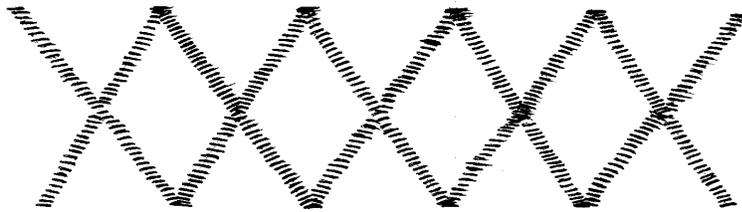


fig. iv. Eegun Eja

3. **Agogo:**

As the name implies, it is an adaptation of the wristwatch and it is always found on the wrist. Like *Igbanu*, it is a row of two lines with a round centre at the back of the wrist.

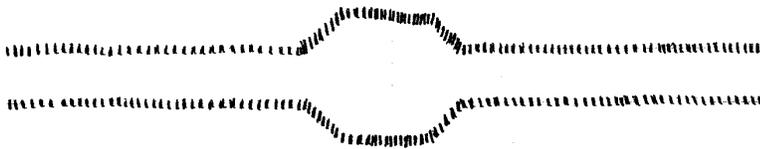


Fig. v. - Agogo

4. **Names:**

Sometimes, names or words are seen on the thigh of some women and such may be the name of the husband of the woman. In those days, divorce was said to be so rare as not to be mentioned and this makes this idea to sound less foolish because oral tradition reveals that a woman who was going to her husband's house was not supposed to be on a pilgrimage. She was supposed to be going to her home and so, she would write some words or names that catch her fancy on her thigh. Some of the most popular among these words/names are:

1. I am yours obediently my dear
2. My husband, commit me into your bosom etc.

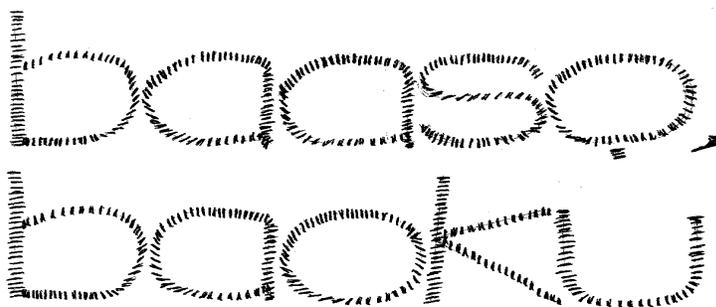


Fig. vi. Names

5. **Igbanu:**

This is no doubt an adaptation of the belt. It is always found across the lower part of the abdomen. Like *Agogo*, Igbanu is a row of two lines with a round centre at the back of the wrist. Furthermore, the centre is round like a belt with a buckle.



Fig. vii. Igbanu

Tattoo Marks in Oru Ijebu.

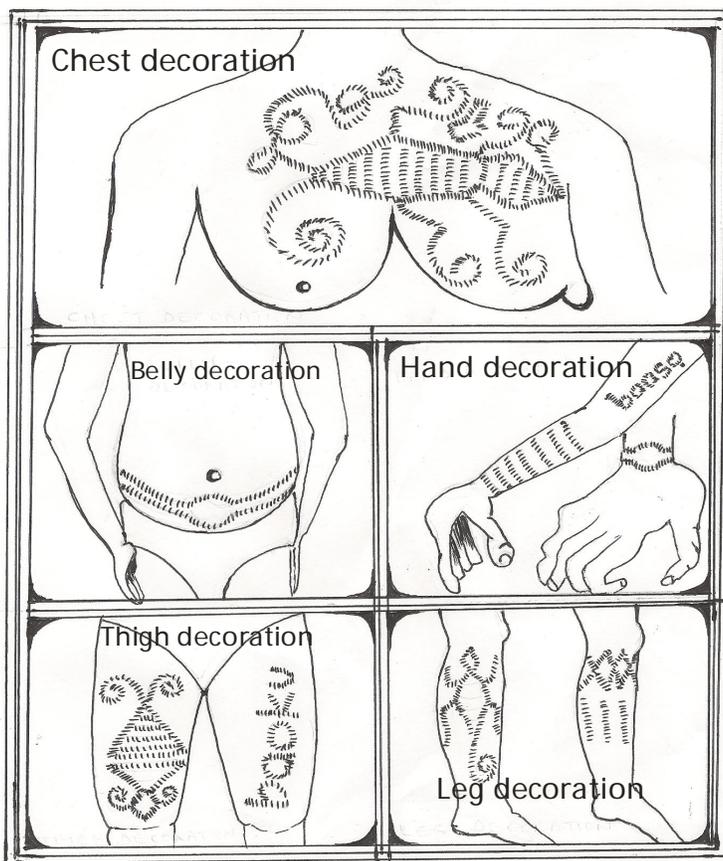


Fig. viii Tattoo Marks in Oru - Ijebu

Method and Materials of Tattoo Making:

The materials used for tattoo making at Oru consist of a needle-like set of three sharp knives attached together to make incisions on the bodies of women. The leaves of a tiny creeping plant called *Buje* were gathered and burnt into charcoal. It is this charcoal powder that is spread on the incisions made to induce blood clot. Further, it is the buje powder that is responsible for the characteristic dark colour of the tattoo marks. Coconut oil is applied from time to time on the marks till they heal to check pains and hasten the healing process.



Fig. ix Tattoo knife

The Socio-cultural Significance of Tattoo Marks

The main purpose of tattoo is to beautify the body. It was once a socio-cultural practice in Oru to adorn female bodies with various decorations through scarification. Some of these decorations are scarified on back, belly and legs before puberty. Later in life, she would decorate her thigh, hand and arms.

From the outset of puberty, it is a cultural practice for a lady to be attached to a suitor. Tattoo is a social means of attracting men into marriage. Oral tradition reveals that once the suitor was known, it was usual for a female to collect money from the named would-be husband and inscribe his name on her thigh and belly as a sign of loyalty, love and ownership, even though, this is no longer the practice nowadays due to the high rate of divorce that have characterized the present generation. In the olden days, however incidences of divorce were rare or may not exist at all.

However, this practice of collecting money from the suitor to scarify his name on her body during courtship is an exhibition of bond of love, ownership and loyalty between the two families. Perhaps, this has caused the rare cases of divorce in those days because such names would remain permanently on her body till death parted them and as long as the mark still remained, every man is totally bond to accept the responsibility of his wife. This socio-cultural practice declined due to the influx of cosmetics, wedding ring and the fear of transmitting deadly diseases like HIV/AIDS, Hepatitis etc through tattoo making.

The Influence of Christianity and Education on Marks Marking

After the Ijebu expedition of 1892, a wind of change started to blow over Ijebu in general and Oru in particular. Notable among these changes are the cessation of hostilities between the Ijebus and their neighbours and the opening up of trade route from Lagos as far as Ibadan (Ayandele, 1983). These opened the way for Christianity to gain converts and build churches and schools all over the Ijebu land. Christianity opposed the worship of idols in all its ramifications. The type of education given by the missionaries was not the type that sees anything good in the indigenous culture (Fafunwa, 1974). The African personality was therefore gradually eroded. At Oru, the tattoo marks

which were formerly a thing of pride quickly became a symbol of idolatry and shame (Olusanya, 1983). The influx of cosmetics also started to relegate the practice of tattoo making to the background (Ochigbo, 2004). Today, the whole episode of tattoo making is obsolete in Oru. As a matter of fact, a survey of tattoo making in Oru-Ijebu reveals that the youngest woman who has tattoo marks on her body is about sixty-five years old.

Conclusion

In view of the findings in this paper, it is important to conclude that tattoo marks have played some important roles in socio-cultural affairs of Oru. The forms, context and significance of tattoo making in Oru Ijebu has been enumerated along with the character of a once flourishing aspect of their culture, which is now apparently outdated. It is hoped that the motifs employed in tattoo makings could be put into use in contemporary design ideas such as in the textiles, rug and carpet industries to remind ourselves of the outdated culture in Oru-Ijebu.

Recommendation

In order to preserve this culture of the Oru people, the following suggestions are pertinent.

1. The women populace at Oru Ijebu should be enlightened through the establishment of women education centres where the intricacies of tattoo marks would be taught.
2. The influx of cosmetics and wedding ring should not be allowed to erode tattoo marks in Oru Ijebu.
3. The *Oloolas* in Oru Ijebu should be made to teach younger women at each women education centre to embrace their culture in the midst of conflicting ideas in a changing world
4. The Federal and State Governments should reduce the high rate of divorce and remarriage that is on the increase in the society through the lawmakers. This would enable the women folk continue with the practice of writing the name of their husband on their body with an impression that marriage is a lifelong contract.
5. The *Oloolas*' should be taught how to construct artistic writings in a legible way by the Graphics Artist of our present day generation.
6. The *Oloolas*' in Oru-Ijebu should be trained through Adult education programmes on how to administer tattoo marks on female bodies without any adverse medical effect on the subjects so as to guide against the transmission of HIV/AIDS, Hepatitis etc.

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